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SUBJECT: RIGHT-WING COALITION WINS PLURALITY IN EARLY LOCAL  
ELECTIONS IN SLAVONSKI BROD

¶1. (SBU) Summary and comment: A coalition of three parties ranging from the far-right Croatian Party of Rights (HSP) to the center-right Croatian Peasant Party (HSS) and the moderate Croatian Social-Liberal Party (HSLs) won 10 of 25 seats in local elections held March 18 in Slavonski Brod. The group will need other partners to form a government. While the center-right Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), which holds power nationally, offered to combine its six seats with the four held by the Social Democrats (SDP), the main opposition party declined to "go against the voters' will." Although the election results in Slavonski Brod confirm a general trend of HSP growth in rural eastern Croatia, the political situation in that city is specific enough not to be taken as representative of the whole country. End summary and comment.

¶2. (U) Three months after the Slavonski Brod city government fell apart over land-sale disputes, Croatia's sixth largest city (with 58,000 voters) held local elections on March 18. The ticket led by former Mayor Mirko Duspara (initially elected in May 2005) of the far-right Croatian Party of Rights (HSP), won 10 of 25 seats in the City Council. This time HSP ran in coalition with the center-right Croatian Peasant Party (HSS) and the moderate Croatian Social-Liberal Party (HSLs); the good result is partly due to the synergy of this coalition and the personalities involved. The nationally ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) won six seats, and the leading opposition Social Democratic Party (SDP) won four. The remaining five seats were divided among smaller and/or regional parties.

¶3. (U) The HSP-HSS-HSLs coalition can count on two more seats won by the regional HDSSB (Croatian Democratic Congress of Slavonia and Baranja) - founded and strongly influenced by war-crimes suspect Branimir Glavas - which already is HSP's ally in the city and county of Osijek in eastern Slavonia. However, the group will need another vote in the City Council to be able to govern. The HDZ meanwhile offered coalition to the SDP, its main rival at the national level, but the SDP rebuffed the offer. Acting SDP president Zeljka Antunovic said the SDP would respect the voters' will and support the winning coalition, without joining it, in case they needed the thirteenth vote. HSP President and Mayor of Osijek Anto Djapic promptly invited the SDP to topple the government in the Brod-Posavina County and thus provoke early elections at the county level, too. In the county, the HSP is still technically in coalition with the HDZ, as it was in the city of Slavonski Brod before the removal of its mayor in December. Early elections in the Brod-Posavina County would give the HSP another chance to assert its rise in the region and to distance itself from the HDZ at the national level as the country approaches parliamentary elections in November.

¶4. (SBU) There clearly is a trend of HSP growth in parts of the country. The party did extremely well in December 2006 neighborhood-level elections in the city of Osijek where its President Anto Djapic is the mayor. However, there is more to the good results in Slavonski Brod than HSP's growing popularity. Its

ally HSLS is traditionally rather strong in Slavonski Brod, while the other partner, HSS, enjoys support in the rural surroundings. Also, the HSP was perceived as victim of an HDZ-led plot, rather than the culprit for the early elections. In general, the HSP is more radical than other parties, and as such more likely to attract protest voters. The city and the county are among the least developed in Croatia - "our twilight zone" as the SDP's economic strategist Ljubo Jurcic recently described it. Nationalism still plays an important role in this city, where many refugee Croats from Bosnia found a new home. "People here vote as sports fans, not as voters who pursue their own interests," SDP leader in Slavonski Brod Zeljko Racki told the Embassy in February. The HSP still seeks to portray every election as a question of "to be or not to be" for the whole Croatian state. Prominent HSP member Pero Kovacevic described the party's success in Slavonski Brod as an outcome of the "people's wish to take care of themselves," without having to be "debtors and slaves to the EU" or part of a "policy of succumbing to foreign forces at the expense of our own country."

BRADTKE